(DON'T) GIVE WAY TO THE RIGHT

By L.S Dell

'WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK!'

That's the deafening grunts of 150 or so far-right protesters surrounding me. Gaunt yellow-skinned faces shout next to the red bowling-ball heads. They have amassed here, on Colchester High Street – a street I have wandered on a thousand times for over a decade.

And yet, I've never seen this.

The racists have assembled. There are the ordinary characters – the skinhead 50-year-olds, in their Harrington jackets, union jacks draped over their shoulders. There are the yobbish, the greasy-haired, the toothless, the men who look like the human personification of gout. The kind of people who looked like they collectively shared two braincells, both of whom were fighting for third place.

But then there are the grandmothers. The average looking blokes. The women who could just be your mums' friends. The normal people, who'd walk past you on the street and you'd never know. The people who could be your neighbours.

The thing that terrified me in this crowd was not the loud shouting blokes, or the gruff old boys. It was the kids. And no, I don't mean the teens, they're destined to cling to this sort of thing, anything that makes a white young man feel like he belongs and has value.

I mean the real kids.

Toddlers, being held in their father's arms, sitting in their buggies.

Holding St. George's Crosses.

They aren't old enough to understand what their parents are a part of. They don't know that they will (hopefully) look back on these days with shame and embarrassment. Or, they'll still be here in 30 years, carrying on the torch.

I'm not entirely sure how I ended up in this position. I'd started a project on Essex, some 6 months ago now. And here I was, surrounded by these "flagshaggers", these vitriolic imbeciles.

When I started this project, it was May, and I didn't know what was to come. I was photographing around the whole county, and there were the few dodgy bits. Some council estates, some car parks – areas I didn't feel fully safe. I'd been shouted at a couple of times, but I'd been alright.

I can remember when visiting Jaywick for the second time, a few months ago, I'd seen a St. George's Cross flag in someone's window, with a Reform UK sticker on their car. At this point, that flag didn't mean that much to me – it was just the English flag. It was the sticker that caught my eye more. Despite being in a place with a Reform UK MP (not only a, but *THE* Reform UK MP, Nigel Farage), this surprised me – how someone could so publicly support a party of racist bullies. How'd Essex seemingly become so much more right-wing?

Well, it turns out it didn't - it's always been right-wing.

By "always", I mean in modern politics. It was a more moderate county in the early 1970s, with a reasonable mix of right and left – the middle-class Tories were balanced out by the left-leaning workers. The Essex landscape was different to what we know today, there was a lot of heavy industry, with the Marconi factory in Chelmsford making radios and defence engineering, with a large Ford factory in Dagenham, and with shipbuilding in Harwich and Thurrock.

All of these industries aren't there anymore. And because of this, the left-leaning workers aren't there anymore either. Like much of the North, Essex was in the twilight of its industrial age in the 1970s, as companies were undercut by foreign labour. The Essex people wanted a solution, they wanted jobs, and they wanted things to be better. This was matched by a similar desire by the London-dwellers of the time. They were sick of living in cramped flats. They wanted their children to grow up somewhere with a garden. This postwar generation of London were disillusioned with the London housing market.

Enter stage left, Mrs T - the un-turnable Iron Lady. She brought forth deregulation of the stock market, causing a boom for day traders – most of whom commuted in from Essex. Her ideas of greed being something to aspire to resonated well with Essex voters. She brought forth the "Right-to-Buy" scheme in the '80s, enabling people to buy their council houses outright. The first council house to be bought, with the deed being handed over by Thatcher herself, was in Romford. Thatcher's policies might have decimated the North, but they appealed greatly to the ambition of Essex.

Since Thatcher's election in 1979, the majority of Essex has always voted Conservative. In fact, in more recent times, Labour haven't even come second, being beaten by UKIP and Reform UK several times. UKIP and Reform UK, both led by the toad-like racist Nigel Farage, have consistently won seats in Essex, especially in coastal constituencies. Currently, half of the Reform UK MPs are in Essex, including Farage in Clacton.

And now, in recent months, suddenly the racists are all out in the open. I mean, when I was just starting this project, Colchester's ex-Mayor, the since made Honorary Alderman Gerard Oxford, tweeted that "we need to create an Auschwitz camp minus the ovens to house the illegals" – something he initially refused to apologise for, before he was forced to resign his position and publicly apologise.

Now, they're spray painting the signs and roundabouts (sometimes quite poorly). The flags are going up around the country, not in celebration, but in intimidation.

I remember a few weeks ago, I was in Basildon, driving around looking at the brutalist architecture. There, I drove down a street, with 30 or so St. George's Crosses in a 30-metre area.

Did I feel proud as an Englishman? No. I felt disgusted. That a symbol of England has become a symbol of right-wing belief, a symbol of racism.

And if I felt disgusted, can you imagine how a Muslim woman might feel on that street? How a Black man might feel? How an Asian child might feel?

What's strange is, the country hasn't suddenly become more racist in the last few weeks. What's happening is, the racism is being publicised. It's visible now, no doubt about it. And the scale to which it is present, is shameful.

Last week, I saw a handful of people holding signs on one of Colchester's main roundabouts.

And now, I stand on my local high street, seeing it parading around in the light of day. They would argue that they're not racist, they're just against illegal immigration. But, they want the boats stopped – boats on which 2/3 of migrants are found to have legal asylum claims, and the vast majority of those who don't, are deported legally.

They want to "keep our women safe", and yet white men rape more people than anyone, and commit more domestic violence than any other group in this country by far. Of those white "patriots" arrested at the Southport Protests/Riots last year, over 50% had a previous criminal record for domestic violence.

They talk about "Londonistan", and share Instagram posts about "getting rid of Abdul".

They say they're getting free phones and hotels, and free spa treatments – they're stealing our jobs and scrounging benefits.

A question – if your protest is not racist, why are there skinheads there? And not the young ones, the original ones, who are now in their 50s. The old EDL, the National Front. If the protest isn't racist, it sure happens to be full of a lot of racists.

A quarter mile down the road, are the other side. And let me tell you, it was much less scary being down there. Here, there are people of all ages, all races, all genders, all sexualities. Old men protest with the teens, mothers protest as their children sit and do their colouring-in. The police here are friendly, more than happy to talk to me. People are proud to be photographed with their signs – whereas the skinheads up the road turn their faces away from my camera.

The Goodies are about triple the number of The Baddies. They're held in place by barriers, and many friendly police officers. But, there's a sense of foreboding on the officers' faces. By their waists hang truncheons, and several squads stand impatiently each side, clutching riot helmets. They're hoping there won't be a fight, that their shifts

will end with no arrests. I saw one police officer, early 20s, stood there waiting with his group, close his eyes and take a deep breath.

The flagshaggers are coming! the flagshaggers are coming!

Around the bend come the collection of caricatures, like wax figures in a museum with broken aircon. They're on the march, and to my surprise, not in goosestep. They're shouting as loud as they can, matched by the other side, resulting in a huge blend of words, all unintelligible from each other.

And here I am, in between them both, rushing around photographing it all. As the two sides come side by side, separated only by a line of police, a metal barricade, and me, the shouting intensifies. The Goodies continue with their chanting - there's not much aggression there. But the racists aren't giving in that easily.

The men lurch forwards, together they look like an amateur bowling team from a town that has a lot of lead in its water. The police are there, to hold them back. But they can't stop the swearing, the middle fingers, their bulbous faces becoming more and more saturated with that "Proper English" blood. That old grandmother I talked about earlier, yells "YOU'RE DISGUSTING" straight past me. The women shout, horrible cackles and fascist rhetoric spilling out between their swollen filler-stuffed lips.

Are the other side swearing? Are they giving the finger? Are they trying to shove past police officers to have a fight?

Not at all.

This kind of thing isn't new in England – it's just the first time a lot of people from my generation have seen it in public. We've had racism for thousands of years, as has every country throughout history – but here it's like an institution. But skinheads on the streets shouting racist hatred? That's not something we've seen for a few decades. Several hundred thousands of people protesting around the nation for the right-wing, wanting "None in, all out", bullying and intimidating anybody of another race. The 1980s seem to be back, and I don't mean shoulder pads.

But there's one image from this event I can't shake, it's one I didn't capture. It was after the racists had been sent round the corner by the police, and it all seemed over. I was going to leave, and I saw on the other side of the street a black man standing with his son. His son couldn't have been more than 7 or so, and he had such a look on his face – a look of such fear. That's what did it for me – kids being scared of racist people marching on the street rather than monsters hiding under their bed.

'WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK! WE WANT OUR COUNTRY BACK!'

But it's never been *their* country. It's always been *our* country – a country for us all, right, left and everything in between - black, white, brown, yellow, even pink and green. It never belonged to only some of us. Because it was the Norman's, before them the

Saxon’s, before them the Celt’s, before them the Neolithic’s, before them the Beakers, and before them the first fishes to crawl out of the sea.

It never belonged to us, we just happened to be born here.

You can’t take back what was never yours.

References:

1. *Dedman, S. - Former mayor made 'Auschwitz' post about migrants* (16/7/2025). BBC News: London. Available here: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cn0qp0x1e5yo [Last accessed 15/1/2025]